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A long loose robe of reddish brown."

A LEGEND  
OF  
GOAT ISLAND

Ascribed to FATHER LOUIS HENNEPIN, who visited  
Niagara in 1678

BY  
PETER A. PORTER

Sketches by C. BRECKINRIDGE PORTER

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## A LEGEND OF GOAT ISLAND

IT is told in Indian story,  
Dim tradition of the race,  
How, to God's eternal glory,  
And through His all-saving grace,  
Many a warrior's heart was stirred  
To belief in His ever-living Word,  
And the Faith that saves us all,  
By a Priest, whose holy mission  
Overcame their superstition  
About the Island, which divides  
Niagara's tumultuous tides,  
At the brink of the mighty Fall.  
Here is the story, as 'tis told  
In one of the chronicles of old.

'T WAS many a year ago, when o'er  
The land on Ni-a-gáh-ra's shore  
The Neuter tribe held sway.  
On its western bank, above, but near,

Where rapids begin, in wild career  
Toward the Fall, and down as low  
As a bark canoe could safely go,  
One of their villages lay.  
In that village by the river,  
Late one eve, when bow and quiver  
Had been laid aside,  
And the warriors were sitting  
In the silence, deemed befitting  
To an Indian's pride,  
A stranger in their midst appeared,  
Whose hoary locks and silvery beard  
Were to their vision strange and weird.  
He was a man of giant size,  
Which found him favor in their eyes,  
As, at his priestly garb amazed,  
In silent wonderment they gazed.

He wore his Sacred Order's gown,  
A long loose robe of reddish brown,

Across his shoulders, lightly flung,  
The cape and cowl backward hung,  
Around his waist a rope was twined,  
A girdle and a scourge combined;  
While from it, hanging loose and free,  
Suspended hung the rosary.  
He was the first of stranger race  
They e'er had met with, face to face,  
Though they knew that such-frocked men  
Had visited their brethren.  
When they saw him, brave and squaw  
Viewed him with a reverend awe.

A wanderer, all alone he came,  
He bore no weapons, gave no name.  
He said his errand was to teach  
The glories of the Life to be,  
When, after death, men's spirits reach  
The confines of Eternity,  
And, as he spake in Indian speech,  
They listened most attentively.  
For he had dwelt for many a day  
Mid Indian tribes, far, far away,  
And thus had learnt the Indian tongue  
From those whom he had dwelt among.  
So, sullenly, they let him share

Their fire's warmth and frugal fare,  
And then they suffered him to tell  
His mission in the way he chose,  
Though little cared they what befell  
Their souls, so they but feasted well,  
And were victorious o'er their foes.

Later on, as they were sitting  
In the fire's cheerful light,  
Shadows round them weirdly flitting,  
As the moon rose into sight,  
The stranger asked, in tones of wonder,  
Whence that sound of endless thunder,  
That dull, reverberating sound  
That seemed to shake the very ground?

For answer, came the Chief's command,  
"Be patient, you shall understand."  
And, knowing Indian nature well,  
He waited till they chose to tell.

Later yet, when chill and hoary  
Lay the frost upon the ground,  
And the moon in all her glory  
Bathed in light the scene around,  
The Chieftain rose, around him drew

The bison skin of tawny hue,  
And signed to the priest to follow.  
He led him through a dense dark wood  
Where many a lofty pine tree stood,  
Then through a winding hollow;  
Whence, as they suddenly emerged,  
The rushing rapids 'neath them surged  
O'er many a rocky ledge.  
Taking, down stream, their silent way  
Toward the rising cloud of spray,  
They reached the Cataract's edge;  
And, from a jutting shelf of stone,  
Saw Ni-a-gáh-ra, then unknown,  
Save to the red man's race alone.  
Earth's grandest sight, conceived to be  
The emblem of God's majesty.

Ne'er has the scene which 'neath them lay  
Been chronicled aright,  
For no one, in a fitting way,  
By pen, nor pencil, *can* portray  
The grandeur of that sight.

The Priest, as by the view amazed,  
Long at the Falls and Rapids gazed,  
But not a word he spoke,

Then crossed himself, as if in awe,  
And 'twas a holy sight he saw.  
At last he turned him to his guide,  
Who stood, like statue, by his side  
And thus the silence broke:

" For two years past I've often longed  
This wondrous sight to see,  
And memory has oft been thronged  
With stories told to me  
By one, upon whose brow I traced  
God's holy Cross, a chief  
In whose narration I have placed  
An absolute belief.  
The glories, which I now behold,  
In words, somewhat like these, he told:

' Towards the Sun's ascending beam,  
Whoe'er his journey takes,  
Will reach a broad and rapid stream  
Which joins two mighty lakes.  
Midway in this river's course  
A wondrous fall is found  
Where, with an overwhelming force  
The waters, rushing in their might,  
Plunge downward o'er a fearful height  
With a stupefying sound.

Right at the precipice so steep,  
Where the river takes this awful leap,  
Is placed an Island, small in size,  
But like an earthly paradise,  
For lovelier spot is nowhere found  
Than this, our Indian burial ground;  
Where none, unless with honor crowned,  
Can ever be interred.

None but brave men e'er can reach  
It's wooded shore and rocky beach,  
Whereon the sound of human speech  
Is scarcely ever heard.

For on this Isle deep-buried lie  
The bones of many a Brave,  
And Indian chiefs invariably  
Ask this spot for their grave.  
Thus it has been, in days of yore,  
And it is my earnest prayer,  
That, when this mortal life is o'er,  
And my soul is on the other shore,  
My bones may be buried there.  
That Ni-a-gáh-ra's mighty roar  
So solemn, grand and deep,  
May be my dirge forevermore  
As 'twixt its Falls I sleep.'

"Since he told me I've often prayed

That hither I might be led,  
And to my vision be displayed,  
In its scenic majesty arrayed,  
The fairest spot God ever made,  
This Island of the dead."

The Chief assented, "All you heard  
Was true to the minutest word;  
But one more fact I must unfold  
Ere all the Island's tale is told,  
Note its wondrous situation,  
'Tis our Spirit's dread abode;  
'Tis a spot that, since Creation,  
Coward's foot has never trod.  
None but warriors can reach it,  
Others, should they dare to try,  
So our old traditions teach it,  
As they touch its soil, they die."

"All that is false," the Priest replied,  
"Whoever taught you that has lied;  
Strong words, I know, but justified,  
For God alone, who gave us breath,  
Has power over life and death."

The Chief declared, "His faith is best  
Who dares to put it to the test.

I judge men's faith in but one way,  
'Tis what they do, not what they say.  
If you believe that you'll survive,  
I'll take you there tonight,  
And, if you tread its shore alive,  
Will own that you are right;  
Then, I'll believe in what you preach,  
And worship Him of whom you teach."

The Priest responded, "Now 'tis clear,  
Why I have been directed here.  
Your sacred Island is to be  
My means of proving conclusively  
To Indian Tribes forevermore  
The power of Him whom I adore.  
An early proof is all I crave,  
For never yet did Indian brave,  
Who'd traveled far to deal the blow  
Of death to his relentless foe  
With greater joy await the hour  
That placed his victim in his power  
Than I impatiently await  
The moment yonder Isle I reach,  
And thereby clearly demonstrate  
The holy precepts that I teach.  
So come, tho' here I fain would stay

My beads to tell and prayers to say,  
I'll worship God on the Island's shore  
After the test you name is o'er."

A look of wonder and surprise  
Shone in the Indian Chieftain's eyes,  
His sole reply, "So let it be,  
Your death shall pay the penalty."

In perfect silence back they went,  
Each on the coming voyage intent.  
When the village they had reached,  
To where his bark canoe lay beached  
The Chieftain turned aside.  
(The bison skin, he flung therein),  
Quickly he launched it, in he leapt,  
And, waiting till the Priest had stept  
Into his place, he bade him kneel,  
So the bark might ride on even keel,  
Then pushed it out on the tide.  
Swiftly it darted from the land,  
Propelled by strong and fearless hand,  
Over the dangerous current flies,  
As the Chief the paddle rapidly plies,  
Until, the wildest portion crossed,  
The frail canoe is no longer tossed



By curling waves, but floats, awhile,  
On the quiet stream above the Isle,  
Towards whose beach it slowly glides  
For weal or woe, as its voyage betides.

The Priest stood up, above his head  
The holy Cross he raised,  
And the words of the "Misereri" said  
As heavenwards he gazed.

The bark meanwhile,  
Has reached the Isle,  
A moment more,  
And the test is o'er.

The Priest stepped boldly on the sod,  
To prove the power of his God,  
And, kneeling on the shore,  
Poured forth a psalm of praise to Him  
Whom Cherubim and Seraphim  
Continually adore.

Then, rising, he addressed the Chief  
Who, sitting in the bark canoe,  
Felt more of wonder than of grief  
At seeing that his old belief  
Was wholly false, for now he knew  
That all the Priest had said was true.

"I tread this Isle alive, and show  
Your Spirit's boasted power  
To be but falsehood; will you now  
Fulfill your solemn Chieftain's vow,  
And own that God, by whom I'm sent  
To teach you, is omnipotent,  
In this auspicious hour?"

As by the issue stupefied,  
The Chieftain doubtingly replied,  
"I little thought you now would be  
Alive to claim my fealty;  
But further proof you yet must give  
Before I can fully agree,  
Although you tread the Isle, and live,  
You have proved conclusively  
That the Spirit I've adored so long  
Is powerless, and my worship wrong.  
Perhaps that Spirit, seeing you cared  
So little for death, your life has spared  
Thus far, but if you long remain  
On the Isle, you surely shall be slain.  
So, if you heed my advice, return."  
Haughtily spake the Priest, "I spurn  
Your advice, so artfully given.  
Daring your Spirit, I have shown

The power of death belongs alone  
To Him, who on the great white Throne,  
Dwelleth forever in Heaven.  
Now, ponder well before you speak,  
Then tell what further proof you seek."

Answered the Chief, "I leave you here,  
With none to aid you, naught to cheer,  
And when tomorrow's sun  
Is high in the heavens, I'll come again.  
If, then, I find you have not been slain  
By my Spirit's might,  
For your act tonight,  
Your victory will be won."

The Priest replied, "I'll give anew  
This proof, that all my words are true;  
But, do not come till another day  
In its rapid flight has passed away.  
When, next, the rays of the setting sun  
Illumine the Falls, as the day is done,  
Go to the spot where tonight we stood,  
Close to the edge of the headlong flood,  
At that hour, and at this edge  
Of that same Fall, on the rocky ledge  
Of the Island's shore, I'll take my stand  
That you, and all your warrior band,

May see that I live; and then to show  
That faith in your Spirit you disavow,  
Kneel down, and there, beside the Fall,  
In the name of God, I will bless you all.  
Then, at this hour, tomorrow night,  
In yonder moon's effulgent light,  
Bring your bark to this spot once more,  
And take me back to the other shore.  
Now go, and leave me, despite your fear,  
Alone with my Maker, who led me here."

The Chief, where the quiet waters lay,  
Up stream, pursued his homeward way,  
To wait the close of another day.  
The Priest, beneath those lofty trees,  
In adoration fell on his knees.

All night long, on that wonderful sod,  
Where never before had white man trod,  
He wandered, ceaselessly praising God  
For the mercies to him granted.  
Oft, in worship he bowed his head,  
His beads he told, his prayers he said.  
And, 'mid those graves of unknown dead,  
O'er whom no burial rites were read,  
The "Nunc Dimittis" he chanted.

All next day, in the forest's shade,  
In solitude, he watched and prayed.

And that evening, at the hour  
When, in lands where Christians dwell,  
From each old cathedral tower  
Rings aloud the Vesper bell,  
The aged Priest his way did wend  
Toward the setting sun,  
To where, at the Island's western end  
The greater waves of rapids descend,  
And the swifter currents run.  
Adown the slope he made his way  
'Mid bushes wet with driven spray.  
Until he reached the rocky ledge,  
Close to the Cataract's eastern edge.  
While he stood there, in the blaze  
Of the setting sun's departing rays,  
The spray-cloud hovered low,  
And, as it settled above his head,  
Across it, in gorgeous colors spread,  
Appeared the sign of the promise made  
By God to man, as the Flood He stayed,  
The evanescent Bow.

When the sun in splendor sank  
Behind the fir trees tall,

Gazing toward the farther bank,  
With a joy no pen can e'er describe,  
He saw the Chief and warrior tribe  
At the other end of the Fall.

The Chief, who saw him as he moved  
From out the forest's shade,  
And realized that again he'd proved  
The truth of all he said,  
Knelt, so the Priest might comprehend  
That faith in his Spirit was at an end.  
The warriors knelt beside their Chief,  
Thus emphasizing their belief.

The Priest was there by God's own will,  
A holy mission to fulfill.  
His human voice, in that grand roar,  
Could not have reached the other shore,  
No matter how he had striven,  
Yet he spake the Word,  
Though it was not heard,  
And he raised his hands,  
As our God commands,  
And lifted his eyes to Heaven;  
Thus, in the way the Church decrees  
To suppliants, tho' afar, on their knees,  
Was the Benediction given.

The Priest was with emotion thrilled,  
His mind with sacred thoughts instilled,  
And, in imaginative mood,  
Again in a holy Church he stood,  
(It was three long years since he  
Had slept within a Sacristy).

A wondrous Church it was, indeed,  
By Nature's changeless laws decreed,  
Tho' man reared not the structure fair,  
All churchly attributes were there.

The gorge was the glorified Nave,  
Whose floor was the emerald wave.  
The mighty Fall  
Was the Reredos tall,  
The Altar, the pure white foam,  
The azure sky,  
So clear and high,  
Was simply the vaulted Dome.  
The column of spray,  
On its upward way,  
Was the smoke of Incense burned;  
The Cataract's roar,  
Now less, now more,  
As it rose and fell,

Like an organ's swell  
Into sacred music turned.  
While, like a Baldachin, o'erhead  
The spray-cloud, in its glory, spread  
Its crest, by the setting sun illumed,  
The form of a holy Cross assumed.

The vision gone, the Priest once more  
Stood, simply on the Island's shore.  
Slowly he climbed the bank again,  
And into the forest passed,  
His body weak with cold and pain  
From his long and sleepless fast.  
Little he cared for the food and rest  
His mortal being craved,  
He only thought, how, at his behest,  
The Chief and warriors had confessed  
Belief in God, and had been blest,  
And their souls might thus be saved.

Again, amongst the trees he knelt,  
Expressive of the joy he felt.  
In worship, loud, his voice he raised,  
His tones through the forest rang,  
As the ever-living God he praised,  
And the "Jubilate" sang.

The twilight passed, but the aged Priest  
From his adorations had not ceased;  
The darkness came, but his only thought  
Was praise of Him whose word he taught;  
The moon arose, and found him there,  
Still in the attitude of prayer.  
But when in the Heavens, high and clear  
She stood, and midnight's hour was near,  
He rose and went to the rocky beach,  
Where alone the Island one may reach.

Soon the Chief, in his birchen bark,  
Came swiftly over the waters dark,  
And reaching the Island's shore  
Cried, "As God's follower, receive  
An erring man. I now believe  
In Him, forevermore."

As the Priest to meet him came  
He said, "Baptize me, in His name."  
The Priest bent down to the river's bed  
And dipped his hand in the wave,  
Then bade him kneel, and on his head  
Poured the water, and joyously said,  
"Your soul I hereby save.  
First convert of the Neuter race,  
Upon your forehead, thus, I trace

The Cross's holy sign;  
And thereby, as you now believe  
In God's omnipotence, receive  
You into His Church divine.  
And, in the Faith you have confessed,  
I bless you, and you shall be blest."

But meanwhile many a bark canoe,  
Bearing those Neuter warriors true  
Was rapidly coming down the tide,  
Along the path, where the waves divide.

As the Isle these warriors reached,  
Their frail canoes they safely beached,  
Then stepped to the Chieftain's side;  
Beneath that grand primeval wood  
In awe-felt silence, there they stood.  
It was a noble sight, and good,  
For the Priest, in his holy pride.

For of the bravest of the land  
Was that converted warrior band,  
All firm in their new Belief;  
And, on this wondrous Island's sod,  
Before that holy man of God,  
Knelt their baptized Chief.



" . . . The Island, which divides  
Niagara's tumultuous tides,  
At the brink of the mighty Fall."

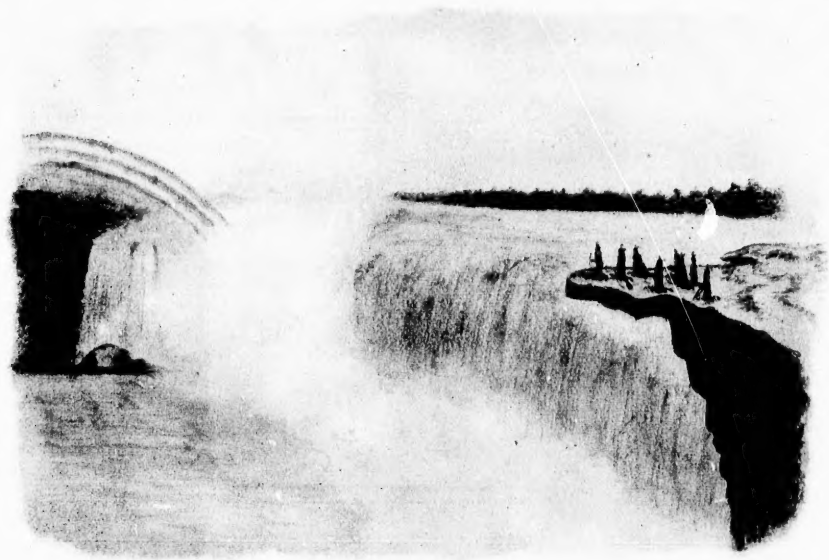


" And, from a jutting shelf of stone,  
Saw Ni-a-gáh-ra, then unknown,  
Save to the red man's Race alone."



"The Priest stood up, above his head  
The holy Cross he raised,"

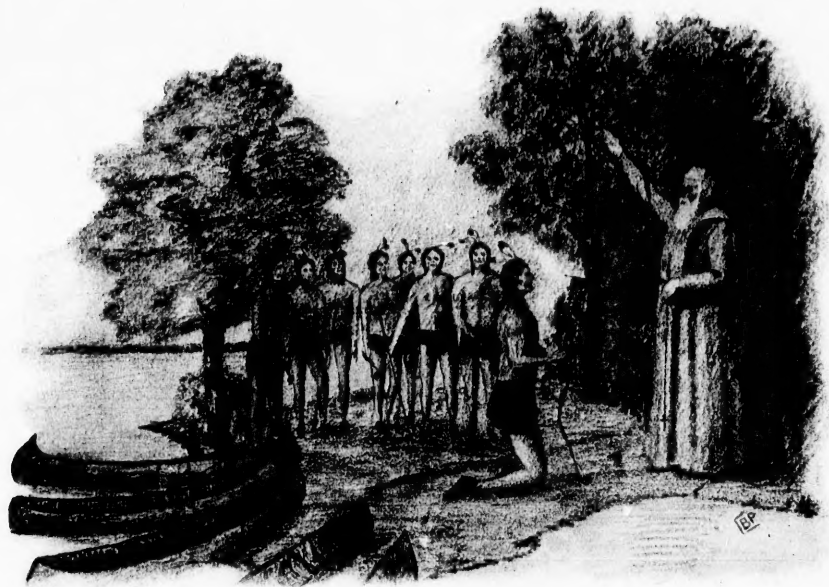




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"While, like a Baldachin, o'erhead  
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